

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 23, 2005

Contact:

Anne Johnson, Director of Communications, (202) 523-3240, ext. 27

WASHINGTON - Four years ago, President George W. Bush famously said that he looked into Russian President Vladimir Putin's eyes, saw his soul, and trusted him. Since then, however, Russia has seen a dramatic decline in freedom, democracy and human rights, along with a rise in authoritarian, and perhaps even chauvinistic, strains in the Russian government. Bush's remarks this week in Brussels suggest that during his meeting Thursday with Putin in Slovakia, Bush's eyes will now be wide open. In reexamining Putin's soul, President Bush should raise with the Russian leader the state of freedom of conscience, tolerance and religion in Russia. Recent extremist trends in Russia this past year threaten to radicalize or marginalize disfavored groups and to undermine security throughout the region.

Russia has accepted all international standards to respect freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief, and related human rights. Yet last year, the Jehovah's Witnesses were banned in Moscow - the first time the activities of a nationally-recognized religious community were banned in post-Soviet Russia. The Russian authorities placed strict controls on the Dalai Lama's movements and public statements during his long-denied visit to Russia last year. Increasingly, members of minority religious groups, particularly evangelical Protestants, face slanderous media attacks and the destruction of their houses of worship. Observers also point to the very close relationship between the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church with the Kremlin, resulting in a privileged position vis-à-vis other religious institutions in Russia.

Less publicized has been a rise in intolerance, including anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, all too often met with passivity, denial, or even encouragement by Russian state officials. Protecting the rights of Russia's Muslims - which demographers project will be 50 percent of Russia's population in twenty years - is not only a legal requirement, but it is the right thing to do and is vital to preventing their future radicalization. And yet there has been a spike in skin-head violence, primarily directed against Muslims, Jews, Buddhists and members of other minorities, migrants and those seen as "non-Russian." A prominent expert on extremism, Nikolai Girenko, was brutally murdered in St. Petersburg, judges have been threatened by

extremist groups, and all too often these cases go unsolved. Last month, nineteen members of the Russian Duma published a virulently anti-Semitic letter calling for banning all Jewish organizations in Russia. Although the letter was later said to be officially withdrawn, its signers did not renounce the views expressed in the letter. A particularly alarming rise in anti-Islamic attitudes among the Russian people has led to the widespread violation of the legal, constitutional, and human rights of Russia's Muslim citizens. Russian leaders have tended to conflate terrorists, Chechens, and Muslims in ways that encourage discrimination and even violence.

Such views need to be reversed and these actions countered. Russian officials should publicly denounce ethnic and religious discrimination. They should press for prompt and proper investigation and prosecution of violent attacks. How a government treats its own citizens is a key indicator of its long-term stability and reliability as a partner in international relations.

As President Bush said, "For Russia to make progress as a European nation, the Russian government must renew a commitment to democracy and the rule of law...And the United States and all European countries should place democratic reform at the heart of their dialogue with Russia." Toward that end, the United States and other countries should strengthen their support for the important human rights monitoring and tolerance promotion activities of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Russia, which will chair the Council of Europe (COE) next year, has ominously demanded that the 40-country organization end its human rights monitoring and reporting. Furthermore, Russia's consistent opposition to OSCE and COE involvement in efforts to monitor the situation in Chechnya has forced those organizations to scale back their important work in this crucial area. By adopting such a rejectionist stance towards global human rights standards, Russia is harkening back to Soviet-era practices. Russia should allow scrutiny of its policies on democratic reform and the protection of religious freedom and other human rights - as any other country would.

Chechnya was not raised in President Bush's Brussels speech. Long-standing calls for the Putin government to move decisively towards a negotiated political settlement to end this brutal and protracted conflict remain unheeded. The conflict has claimed thousands of victims, including civilians in Chechnya, Russian soldiers, and Russia's Muslim minorities, who are often automatically equated with terrorism and may be subjected to heinous treatment. The conflict has spawned acts of terrorism in various parts of Russia, such as the horrific massacre of schoolchildren in Beslan last September. One of the added consequences of this horrible situation is the way it has reinforced intolerance and violence directed against Russia's Muslim and Caucasus populations.

As President Bush observed in his inauguration speech and echoed in Brussels, “Freedom, by its nature, must be chosen, and defended by citizens, and sustained by the rule of law and the protection of minorities.” Russia should not be an exception to that eloquent invocation. President Bush should fashion specific policies that promote democracy and encourage tolerance and respect for human rights in Russia.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

- Preeta D. Bansal ,
- Felice D. Gaer ,